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Citation for published version:

Wise, L Refugee crisis response Event I: The roots of the Syria crisis.

Link:

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Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Global Justice Blog

Global Justice Academy and Global Development Academy, University of Edinburgh

Refugee Crisis Response Event I: The Roots of the Syria Crisis

Posted on **October 13, 2015** by **Mathias Thaler**

As a contemporary and prominent topic, a panel event discussing the roots of the Syria crisis was always going to be well attended. In front of a packed lecture theatre, on October 6th 2015, **Dr. Thomas Pierret**, **Dr. Manhal Alnasser**, and **Arek Dakessian** presented their points of view on the causes and changing shapes of the crisis in Syria since the popular uprising in 2011, chaired by **Dr Sarah Jane Cooper Knock**. Each speaker brought their experiences as academics, practitioners and personal stories to the event.

Internal issues, not proxy war

Thomas began the discussion by raising the two prominent explanations for conflict in Syria: the first, which he subscribes to, that it was a domestic problem which became internationalised; and the second, that it was a proxy war from the outset. He argued that the conflict started with the popular uprising against Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian regime, in which the power lies in family patronage networks rather than institutions. The immediately repressive state response, sectarian-social divides between police and protestors, and subsequent defections, all led to the formation of a crowdfunded armed movement against Assad, which was a well-established force before international actors became involved. Finally, he claimed that the regime is now compensating for its lack of manpower with increased firepower, and that this has led to mass displacement through the total destruction of rebel-held areas, especially cities.

"It makes my blood boil"

Manhal shared his personal experiences as a native of Tablisi in Homs, a city which was an early joiner of the revolution, and more recently, one of the first targets of Russian air strikes. He rooted his talk with information from his family and friends still in Syria, explaining that the disparity between Russian military justifications for targets, and personal accounts from the area about humanitarian facilities being hit, makes his "blood boil". He disputed claims that ISIS are still in the area, and argued that misrepresentation of the situation on-the ground will actually radicalise Syrians to join terror groups. Like Tomas, he mentioned the role of forced conscription by the regime, and that the threat of this drives young people to leave the country. Manhal spoke in a personal capacity, but he also works for **Hand in Hand for Syria**, an aid organisation operating inside Syria.

Lived experiences of crisis

Arek began his talk by highlighting how we must be aware of the human side of conflict and displacement when talking about Syria. He drew from Lebanese experiences of civil war and bordering Syria, and agreed with the other panellists that the roots of the conflict lie in the domestic sphere, but not to ignore the developments since 2011. He argued that it is important to think about Syrian society as a heterogeneous society, and the nuances between the different constitutive parts of Syria, including the roles played by different groups, such as Kurds and Armenians. Arek spoke in a personal capacity, but he also works for **LIVED**, an organisation supporting displaced youth worldwide.

“It is not up to the West to make peace with Bashar”

Following the panel, a lively discussion ensued, with questions from the audience on reliable sources, Turkey’s role, the future of Syria with Assad in power, links to Palestine, the fate of the Free Syrian Army, and the predictability of the crisis. The variety of questions reflected the complexity of the situation in Syria and the wider Middle East region, whilst the different backgrounds of the three panellists meant that their responses also covered a broad range of issues, and how the various questions interplay on the ground.

This event was the first in a series co-ordinated by the Global Justice Academy (GJA) and other Centres across the University in response to the refugee crisis, which over the semester will include roundtables and film screenings. The GJA has also set up a Refugee Crisis Portal, directing users to further information about Edinburgh University services which can help refugees.

Refugee Crisis Portal – Global Justice Academy

Laura Wise, Global Justice Academy

This entry was posted in **Conflict, Middle East, migration, Refugees, resources, Response, Syria** by **Mathias Thaler**. Bookmark the **permalink** [<http://www.globaljusticeblog.ed.ac.uk/2015/10/13/refugee-crisis-1/>] .
